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Author(s): Peter Cox

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Dr Peter Cox
Department of
Social Studies and
Counselling



University of
Chester

Silenced Voices: why some people matter and some do not

My approach to the topic considers issues of power inequality and how these affect our interactions and relations between groups and individual in a multi-cultural context. The latter point is not simply limited to a multi-ethnic context but is more far-reaching considering class gender, age, capacity and linguistic difference and other forms of diversity.

Who do we think we are?

“Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations. ... Nations and peoples are largely the stories they tell themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings.”

Ben Okri *Birds of Heaven* 1996



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What is our story? How do we imagine ourselves to be as individuals and people?

Our current national myth is of equality

It is based on the story that we are all sovereign individuals. Independent beings each capable of heroic achievement, held back by lack of ambition or drive or willpower. Problem is, this is a story that is a lie.

Webs Of Power

- We are entangled in webs of power
- Caught up in pre-existing patterns of story and history
- Shaped in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, age, nationality, impairment, education, education, religion, sexuality ...

Each thread catches us, tugs at us. Pulls us towards a particular direction, a particular identity.

We are entangled and ensnare by forces outside our control.

Each of these descriptions gives us an aspect of our identity. Each has its own set of stories and histories, tells us what is important, what is acceptable or proper, what is important, where one should fit in the bigger picture.

The sociologist Peter Berger back in the 1960s used the analogy of a puppet theatre: we each act out our individual and collective parts on the stage, scripted and controlled by forces outside of ourselves.

Institutional webs

- Not just persons
- Institutions have their own webs of power, unspoken rules of operation
- Assumptions of e.g. hierarchy, deference



Looking at a wider canvas than just us as people we can look at the play of power in the institutions to which we belong,
Places of employment, of religion, communities each have their own hidden stories about how different people matter more than others

Who matters depends on who you are. Whose experience in any given society is taken as normal, against which others are judged?
Even which experiences of health are assumed to be normal?

The normal becomes invisible and subtly renders other experiences and perspectives as just that: other, abnormal and by implication undesirable and lower in value.

Thus who gets heard its not just a question of whose voice shouts the loudest but of how some stories are told in order to actively deny others the right to speak, to deny them the capacity to give voice.

Structural webs

- Least visible webs of power perhaps the most insidious
- What are our national stories?
- Recognizing the power of the colonial legacy we can see how these global stories may reconnect with us even at a personal level



Moving even further outwards

We are here as part of a United Kingdom built upon imperialism

Deliberate policies of denying that imperial subjects have a voice or even the right to the voice.

Not just in terms of language and not just in terms of overseas territories.

National territories and the Welsh language give us another example

But it is also visible in terms of social class, and of gender

Keeping this broader geographical and historical view, shows in refusal of voting rights, refusal of autonomy to colonial subjects

From the post-colonial perspective in his essay on the psychology of colonialism, Ashis Nandy explores how those grand long stories become internalised even down to an individual level.

We absorb these stories of who we are and who can and cannot speak, who matters and who doesn't matter, and we respond to this internalisation in different ways.

Responses

- Does this mean we are powerless?
- No but it does mean that we have to work to understand how power pervades all our relationships, at all levels

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We absorb these stories of who we are and who can and cannot speak, who matters and who doesn't matter, and we respond to this internalisation in different ways.

At the beginning I mentioned Peter Berger's analogy of the puppet theatre. I didn't give you the second part of the story.

which is that We see the puppets dancing on their miniature stage, moving up and down as the strings pull them around, following the prescribed course of their various little parts. We learn to understand the logic of this theatre and we find ourselves in its motions. We locate ourselves in society and thus recognize our own position as we hang from its subtle strings. For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. But then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theatre and our own drama. Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom.

Source: Berger, P. (1963), *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p199.

As we begin to see which forces are acting on us, which stories are telling us who matters and who doesn't matter, we begin the process of gaining the capacity to change how things are. To hear, to listen and to assist others to hear and listen – sometimes to themselves and their own silenced inner voices.

Conclusions

- Some people 'matter' only because structures and institutions raise them up
- The same forces act to exclude others, to make them 'not matter'
- Understanding that power runs through every relationship and interaction allows us to examine how that power works to legitimate some voices and silence others

Billy Bragg (Ideology) When one voice rules the nation / Just because they're top of the pile / Doesn't mean their vision is the clearest / The voices of the people are falling on deaf ears as politicians all become careerists

Once we understand better how the apparently natural, inevitable, immutable, eternal aspects of our lives have been brought into being through the exercise of human power and human resources, we will find it hard to accept once more that they are immune and impenetrable to human action—our own action included

(Bauman, Z. (1990) *Thinking Sociologically* Oxford: Blackwell p. 16)